



Between Christianity and African Spirituality

How does a minister of the Methodist Christian church relate to traditional indigenous spirituality? In this article Abraham Mwadiwa from Zimbabwe describes his personal religious experiences and explains his involvement in endogenous development activities in Southern Africa. Presently he is the co-ordinator of the Southern African Endogenous Development Programme (SAEDP).

“As a child, I grew up in a rural Zimbabwean community with a strong Methodist Christian tradition. I attended church every Sunday and my deeply religious family taught me to pray and read the scriptures. I was baptised into the Methodist community and as an adolescent committed myself to the church in the rite of confirmation. I was still a very young man when, as a youth leader, I felt called to become a preacher. Before the Methodist community accepted me, however, I had to explain why I wanted to become a preacher. This required reflection and self-searching and in the process I became more aware of why I wanted to commit myself in this way.

Encounter

Since then, as a Methodist minister, I have served on many local, national and international organisations, including the World Methodist Council, the Christian Council of Zimbabwe and the World Council of Churches. In 1991, my work brought me in contact with the Association of Zimbabwe Traditional Environmentalists (AZTREC). Suddenly I found myself working with chiefs, spirit mediums and villagers in Masvingo. AZTREC is an association of traditional institutions working to conserve the rich biodiversity of sacred shrines and groves.

The AZTREC approach to conservation immediately appealed to my heart and to my mind. Like an eager young child I wanted to learn more of this knowledge, with its values and concepts of humanity that were new to me. My experience with AZTREC marked a turning point in my life: the beginning of a conscious process that would lead to an understanding of the essential nature and vitality of endogenous development.

As I reflected on the impact my contact with traditional ways and thinking were having on me, I became aware that, as a preacher and professional, I had reached a cross roads. I had embarked on a new journey that

challenged my strict adherence to Christian principals. I risked losing my position in the church and being separated from the only religious environment I had ever known. But, I also could not ignore these experiences that offered me a more natural learning and living environment. I wanted to resolve the seeming antagonism between Christianity and African religions: did they repel each other or could they strengthen and enrich each other? The moment of truth had come: I am an African. I thus accepted this challenge in the full self awareness of being an African.

African spirituality

The gift of life in the African context is celebrated in many rituals and festivals. These vary from family to family, and from clan to clan. God is the spiritual focus and this awareness determines the practice of rites and ceremonies. The spirits of the forefathers form the ancestral domain, the lower gods with whom human beings and the yet unborn interact. In a spiritual sense, human beings are the stewards of the biodiversity found within God’s natural universe. As I watched spirit mediums and rainmakers perform rituals, and traditional healers bring the sick back to health, I realised that God was being recognised as the ultimate giver of life, and the source from which we derive our talent for living life to the full.

In 1997, I travelled with AZTREC to Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, South Africa and Zambia. I was introduced to many traditional leaders, and observed an overwhelming degree of commonality in religious considerations, structures and practices. There seemed to be five distinct but overlapping hierarchies bound by an intuitive, instinctive connectivity (see figure 1).

Notable changes

In the Methodist church, notable changes continue to occur. I am glad to see the traditional practices of African drumming and other instruments integrated into acts of worship in church.

Africans are a music loving people. Christianity becomes more relevant when it encompasses the experiential perspective of the African belief.

My ancestors have never let me down. As a Christian originating from my African ancestry, I believe there is a symbiotic relationship between the ancestry and Christ. I realised that the Book of Genesis gives a description of God’s creation in the Old Testament similar to the ones I had distilled from traditional leaders. I knew that within Judaism there were examples of God intervening through prophets and priests, who mediated the laws of ancestors such as Abraham and Isaac, when communities were in trouble. In the New Testament, Christ himself refers to his ancestors and uses examples drawn from the cultural and natural world to reach his listeners.

Granted this background I argue against the demonisation of African religion and try to explain my position to my wife, my family, my church and my employers. Traditional and religious institutions are the cornerstone of African peoples’ humanity. They are the carriers of the indigenous knowledge essential to endogenous development.”

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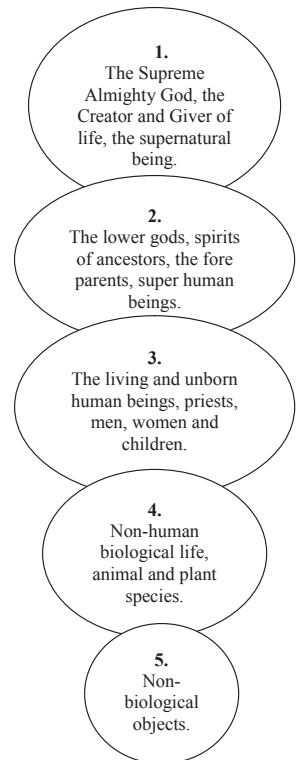


Figure 1
Five hierarchies in traditional spirituality. Circles 1 and 2 form the Spiritual worldview. Circle 3 forms the Human worldview. Circles 4 and 5 form the Natural worldview.

